Making Interest Groups Work for the Public

If there is one subject which divides political scientists and the public, it is interest groups. An overwhelming majority of the public is dismayed about the power of interest groups, and sees them as perverting public policy. Political scientists counter that interest groups are inevitable and, on balance, useful. Oddly, one might take the position that both sides are right. Political scientists may be correct in suggesting that interest groups were always with us, that they cannot be suppressed without doing away with our constitutional freedoms, and that they enhance representation in a pluralistic society and help conduct public business, much of which occurs between elections. The public may be right in sensing that interest groups have gotten out of hand. It is not, as we shall see, business as usual for special interests.

The Public versus Special Interests
Survey researchers regularly tap public feelings of alienation. Their polls include such “agree-disagree” items as “in this country the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” and “the people in Washington, D.C. are out of touch with the rest of the country.” The tone of the statements is harshly “anti,” yet a surprisingly large segment of American society agrees with them. Other data, such as people’s responses to questions concerning trust in institutions and their leaders, reflect the same dissatisfaction.

Of the alienation measurements frequently tapped by survey researchers, none elicits more agreement than “special interests get more from government than the people do.” Eighty-four percent in May 1980 agreed; 10 percent disagreed (ABC News/Louis Harris and Associates).

In this context, the public’s well-known feelings about government bigness take a new twist. In recent years, a majority have come to see big government as the prime source of our difficulties. Typically asked, “Which of the following do you think will be the biggest threat to the country in the future?” 46 percent listed big government, 22 percent big labor, and 22 percent big business (Gallup, 1981). However, when people were asked, “Which of these reasons, if any, do you think is the main reason our system of government doesn’t work better than it does?” one reason led all others by a hefty margin. Forty-two percent in an October 1978 Roper sounding agreed that “there is too much influence on government by special interest groups and lobbyists.” Next on the list was “too many people vote without thinking”; that drew 19 percent.

Asked about political action committees (PACs), the newest and most popular tool of interest groups, the public answered that they “are pouring too much money into the whole political process.” (71 percent agreed, 19 percent disagreed, 10 percent were not sure in an ABC News/Harris survey, January 1980).

Political Science “Conventional Wisdom”
Political scientist Harmon Zeigler cites numerous critics of special interests, beginning with James Madison in Federalist 10. Since the founding of the republic, Zeigler claims, there has been an assumption that pressure groups are “evil because they conflict with the fundamental attributes of democracy.” Criticism of interest groups as a threat to democracy, Zeigler concludes, is “based upon a concept of democracy which is both inadequate and naive.”

An often-cited study of Washington lobbies by Lester Milbrath points out that:

... the public and the press have a very lively distrust of lobbying. ... Yet evidence gathered for this study suggests that the public is misinformed about lobbyists and lobbying. The press tends to focus on the sensational and to expose the unsavory aspects of lobbying. ... [T]he evildoers constitute only a small percentage of the persons engaged in lobbying and ... lobbyists often provide valuable services to the political system.

Noted political scientists Arthur F. Bentley and David B. Truman have concluded that interest groups are
The Functions of Interest Groups

Political science has often identified the following as contributions of interest groups to pluralistic democratic politics:

- **Interest groups provide a mechanism for political representation which supplements the electoral process.** Elections are infrequent and each voter has but one vote. Interest groups can represent citizens who seek to express their views more frequently and on more issues than the electoral process can accommodate. In that sense, the more voluminous and encompassing the public business becomes, the greater the need for interest groups.

- **Interest groups join social-economic power concentrations and the polity.** The one person/one vote electoral system, which is relatively egalitarian, does not reflect the society's more extensive social and economic power concentrations. Interest groups allow the political process to be more responsive than the electoral process to the "realities" of social and economic power differences, and thus to protect the government from forming policies detached from what society will support.

- **Interest groups provide a bridge between the administrative and legislative arms of government, especially valuable when the two branches check and balance each other into a stalemate.** Interest groups, less confined by the institutional strictures which limit executive/legislative maneuverability, can alleviate the excessive separation of the legislative and executive branches by approaching both with the same advocacy.

- **Interest groups constitute one major source of "mediating structures" which stand between the state and the individual, protecting the individual from undue control by the state.**

Recent American History

In the last two decades (1960-1980) the level of cohesiveness of the American national political system and the effectiveness of its institutions seem to have diminished. In the same period, the power of interest groups—of all kinds—has grown. The result is a system much less able to contain them and to digest their contributions. Interest groups, then, have become more potent but less functional.

The developments which resulted in a lower level of national integration and political effectiveness are well known. Sociologists have pointed out that the heterogeneous American people find it more difficult to share positive political beliefs than to oppose a set of values—such as communism. In 1960, the majority were still united by a world view which saw expanding communism as a sinister worldwide force and the United States as the leading power entrusted to contain it. The Soviet threat provided the United States a rationale for specific foreign policy acts and a host of domestic activities.

This "anti" consensus was much weaker by 1980. Division within the communist camp and the nation's emphasis on peaceful cooperation diminished ideological consensus and commitment.

The Rise of Alienation

Since 1966, pollsters have regularly published data on the trust Americans put in various institutions. In 1966, 43 percent said they had "a great deal of confidence" in leaders of the major institutions of American society; by 1981 only 22 percent said they felt that way (Harris, October 1981).

The political institutions in particular were big losers. Confidence in Congress stood at 16 percent in 1981 and in the executive branch at 24 percent. The index of alienation feelings rose from 27 percent in 1966 to 56 percent in 1982.

Everett Carll Ladd called attention to the difference between a sense of loyalty to America and commitment to its basic political system, and a sense of its performance and competence. The public, the data show, has lost little of the former but much of the latter.

Decline of Voter Participation

The percentage of the voting-age population not voting for any candidate in presidential elections has increased steadily over the last two decades. In 1960, 37.2 percent didn't vote; in 1980, 47.5 percent didn't. Both Carter and Reagan were elected by parts of the electorate much smaller than the nonvoting "party." It is widely agreed that a significant part of rising voter apathy is due to a rising disaffection from the national polity.

Economic Trends

A rapidly expanding pie is commonly viewed as more conducive to conflict settlement within a community than one which is growing slowly or not at all. Yet our GNP has been shrinking, as has our GNP per employed worker. The result is fewer resources to be allotted, and increasing strains between competing demands.

Ironic Reforms

Congressional reforms and the decline of the political parties had a double effect—they weakened the national political system, and they increased the power of interest groups. Certain reforms—abolition of the seniority system in selecting committee chairmen, and the proliferation of subcommittees creating numerous autonomous power centers—increased fragmentation and decreased the ability to act in unison.

The Rise of Interest Groups

While the system weakened, the number, scope, and power of interest groups rose. Histories of democracies have often been told in terms of expanding voting
elective offices were left to operate as independent en-

the parties withered, candidates for Congress and other

number of political action committees sponsored by

the broader, more widely representative parties. Everett

pressure from interest groups.

members kept committee members in line. Instead, each

member became much more autonomous, freer to make
deals with other members and to respond to direct
pressure from interest groups.

The identification of citizens with the political
parties has diminished in recent years. As a result,
members of Congress are freer to deal with interest
groups and under less countervailing pressure from
the broader, more widely representative parties. Everett
Carll Ladd, reviewing the situation, summarized it: “As
the parties withered, candidates for Congress and other
elective offices were left to operate as independent entre-
preneurs.”

The state of the American polity as of 1980 can be
summed up briefly: as the bonding factors diminished,
the forces of fragmentation were enhanced. Lost is the
balance between pluralism and unity.

Toward a Corrective

Numerous specific suggestions have been made to curb
interest groups and return them to their more limited,
balanced, and presumably less damaging status. A
certain amount of caution is necessary because many
reforms have worsened the situation rather than im-
proved it.

The current PAC boom resulted, ironically, from a
series of efforts to curb the influence of wealth on the
electoral process. A $1,000 limit was placed on the
amount an individual could give to congressional can-
didates in either primary or general elections. With the
end of unlimited contributions, wealthy individuals and
business executives sought new ways to channel their
money into the political process.

Reforms in other areas also backfired. Another
amendment made in 1974, ironically advocated by labor
unions, loosened the regulations concerning PACs run
by industries and organizations with government con-
tracts. Corporations still hesitated to use PACs, how-
ever, until after the Federal Election Commission ruled
in the 1975 SunPAC case to allow corporations to use
funds to administer PACs, and to funnel solicitations of both employees and stockholders. With
that decision, the PAC boom was on.

The seniority system in Congress was overthrown
to limit the power of special interests. With the loosening
of the seniority reins, however, numerous autonom-
ous power centers were created that were less re-
sponsive to traditional party leadership, less account-
able, and more open to influence by the various special
interests.

Some reforms now favored might violate the Con-
stitution. One suggestion requires that a government
official approached by a lobbyist file a report on the
encounter. This might have a chilling effect on the
freedom of speech of organizational representatives,
not to mention the avalanche of paper work that would
be created.

Whatever reform measures come to mind, by them-
selves they will not suffice unless supplemented by a
revival of political parties. Political parties are hardly
popular these days. Indeed, numerous Americans see
them as interest groups—and not particularly attrac-
tive ones. Parties tend to be partisan and to bicker with
each other and hamper the presidency. The recent trib-
ulations over the federal budget have surely not en-
deared either party to the public, which blames both.

Politics is, though, often a matter of choice between
two imperfections—to put it mildly. Parties are less
troublesome than interest groups because they repres-
ent a much wider constituent base than interest groups,
articulate a much larger spectrum of issues and needs,
and—in America, as far as the two main parties are
concerned—tend to moderate their more extreme fac-
tions over time. Also, they moderate and digest specific
interest groups. Above all, since the system works on
checks and balances (with the parties checking interest
groups), the erosion of the parties is a major factor in
the interest groups’ getting out of hand.

There is no specific measure or even a set of meas-
ures which can be recommended as ways to restore
the political parties—for those willing to embrace this
approach. Like other institutions, parties rise and fall
due to complex social, attitudinal, intellectual, and eco-

2 Ibid., p. 35.
3 Lester Milbrath, The Washington Lobbyists (Chicago: Rand McNally,
1963), pp. 6-7.
4 “How to Tame the Special Interest Groups,” Fortune, October 20, 1980,
p. 67.

PUBLIC OPINION, AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1982 55